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ABSTRACT

One avenue for authentic exploration of different cultures is to incorporate folktales and folklore into early childhood curriculum. Universal themes are found as common threads in the folklore of many cultures, and folktales and folklore contribute to learning about each culture's rich heritage. Folklore and folktales teach young children about the values, celebrations, histories, traditions, and art forms of cultural groups. Examples of the folklore that allow more than a tourist look at the experiences of different people is that of Yup'ik-speaking people, the Eskimos of western Alaska. A close look at the content of Eskimo folktales can reaffirm a child's own heritage, introduce another child to an indigenous culture, and provide real "lessons of life." Themes of great importance to the Yup'ik culture are parts of the "Yuutait," or the rules and regulations of child-rearing. Some themes of the Yuutait include love of children, knowledge of the family tree, and cooperation. More common in contemporary society is the use of picture books in place of traditional folklore. Although it is difficult to know and understand diverse cultures, using folktales and stories can provide more than a cursory explanation of differences. (Contains 10 references.) (WJC)

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Lessons in Living:

Incorporating Folklore Into Young Children's Lives

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February, 1997

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The Early Childhood field has led efforts to support children's unique heritages and diverse experiences (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; Neugebauer, 1992). In striving to communicate a real understanding of different cultures and avoid stereotypes, curriculum materials must be deliberately selected and evaluated for content (Derman-Sparks, 1989). One avenue for authentic exploration of different cultures is to incorporate folktales and folklore into the curriculum.

Universal themes are found as common threads in the folklore of many cultures and folktales and folklore contribute to learning about each culture's rich heritage. Folklore and folktales teach young children about the values, celebrations, histories, traditions, and art forms of cultural groups and must be appreciated by the storyteller for the array of knowledge they contain.

Folklore can provide children with authentic information if the storyteller or reader does some homework. Homework prevents a "tourist curriculum where children visit non-white cultures and then go home to the daily classroom which reflects only the dominant culture" (Derman-Sparks, 1989).

Examples of the folklore that allows more than a tourist look at the experiences of different peoples is that of Yup'ik speaking people, the Eskimos of Western Alaska. Appreciation of their stories is especially important because there has been a general diminishing of Alaska Native cultures due to contact with outside cultures. They have experienced rapid assimilation of the traditional culture into Western culture. Brown (1986) writes regarding those who have experienced a loss of culture, "it is of crucial importance to rediscover and reaffirm their own heritage." A close look at the content of Eskimo folktales can reaffirm a child's own heritage, introduce another child to an indigenous culture, and provide real "lessons of life".

Universal Themes

Themes of great importance to the Yup'ik culture are part of the "Yuutait" or the rules and regulations of child-rearing. Traditionally these rules were passed from parent to child in the oral tradition through stories. They were taught daily and knowing them was the responsibility of each person. In the 1980's, the elders made a written record of the "Yuutait" as a reminder to the people of the area.

Universal Themes of "Yuutait"

*** love of children * respect for elders * family role**

*** knowledge of the family tree * domestic skills**

*** hunter success * sharing * humility * cooperation**

*** hard work * avoiding conflict * spirituality * humor**

Two pieces of Yup'ik folklore are "Never Sleepy Man" and "How Attu Became a Hunter" written down by Gillman in 1955. They are examples of folklore that teach many things to those who hear the stories.

Never Sleepy Man

"Never Sleepy Man" is a tale about a good man who cured the sick and spent much of his time finding seals and fish. He is the victim of foul play by medicine men of another village who believe he will take all their seals and their fish and his fate is death. Before he dies, he makes a mask for his fellow villagers to be used during spring to call the fish and seals. The setting is the area of Hooper Bay and Nunivek Island in Western rural Alaska.

Similar to an Aesopian fable, "Never Sleepy Man" teaches values and ethics important to the Yup'ik culture as well as referring to traditions, celebrations, history, geography, art forms, and tools. The work ethic is valued and translated as hard work and the development of skills. Never Sleepy Man is known for working diligently to find seals and fish. He tells the men not to be lazy and to "get out and do things". In Yup'ik culture,

it is important to pay attention and to be responsible for tools and hunting equipment which could mean survival in a vast land. It is also important to finish projects and to learn to be responsible.

Traditional Yup'ik spirituality was carried on and manifested not only in rituals, but with every day activities. It was believed that some human beings were gifted with special powers. The Shaman (adopted from the Russian language) or Medicine Man usually had one unique gift. The ability to travel on water, heal through touch or saliva, or communicate with spirits, good and bad are examples of these gifts (L. Jones-Sparck, personal communication, April 13, 1996). Never Sleepy Man has the power to heal the sick and walks and swims through water like a seal. He is plotted against by wicked Medicine Men who have the power to cause an illusion which ultimately results in his death.

In the end, Never Sleepy Man gives his villagers a mask which is to be used during a spring dancing ceremony to call to the seals and the fish. Dance ceremonies were important in traditional Yup'ik culture. During the dance, the participant reached a level of consciousness accompanied by song or drumming and it was believed the ceremony aided in the coming hunting season (L. Jones-Sparck, personal communication, April 14, 1996). It is possible that this masked dance was performed during Kelek, or the "Masquerade" which focused on the relationship between the human community and the spirit world and began the year with each in its proper position. Mask-making declined in the Nunivak Island area in the 1950's due to the influence of Christian missionaries. Masks continued to be made for sale but were not used in local dances (Fienup-Riordan, 1990). Today, these objects of myths and memory are part of a grassroots effort to foster pride and self-awareness among the Yu'pik speaking people (Fienup-Riordan, 1996).

How Attu Became A Hunter

"How Attu Became a Hunter" is another Yup'ik folktale. It is the story of a young orphaned boy and his pursuit of excellence and skill as a hunter. Attu is a hard worker

who dreams of nothing but becoming a great hunter. He is given an image by the Great Spirit which shows as a great hunter and believes what he sees. It is the tale of "listening to the advise of the old people, working hard, and calling upon the Great Spirit to make you strong".

This tale reminds the reader of the value of hard work and responsibility and the importance of the extended family. Attu is a role model for males as he is an excellent provider and hunter and he is successful and strong

Hunter success is an important Yup'ik value. It includes knowledge of animals, the land formations and vegetation. One must be prepared for different weather conditions and emergencies. The elders passed on this knowledge and Attu had listened well. According to elders, because he was a successful hunter, he probably listened to more than just the words, he "swallowed the knowledge" or "tied it up in a bag or his pocket" (L. Jones-Sparck, personal communication, April 15, 1996).

Traditionally the boy's first kill was given away to members of the village. Attu shared his first kill, a mukluk (seal). Even today, sharing is an important value for survival among the Yup'ik people, whether it is food or other material wealth. Present day celebrations involve gift giving and the sharing of food.

The tale of Attu refers to mammals in the Hooper Bay region: the mukluk, the smaller seals, and the spotted seals. The mukluk is the largest seal in the area and can weigh as much as 935 pounds. The smaller seal is the ringed seal and weighs in at approximately 200 pounds. The spotted seal reaches an approximate weight of 250 pounds.

The tale of Attu gives other information about the traditional culture. The tools he used for hunting included bows and arrows, harpoons, and a kayak (an Eskimo canoe made with a skin-covered frame). Other artifacts mentioned in the story are the grass baskets tied with sealskin, and nets made from braided whale sinews (tendons). Foods mentioned are the great pieces of mukluk blubber, greens from the lake, and berries for

Eskimo ice cream (traditionally berries whipped by hand with seal oil, today Crisco is used). Some Yup'ik names for Eskimo ice cream are akutaq, amekaq, mak'aq, passiaq, qamaanaq and uqumleg (Jacobson, 1984). These foods are popular in contemporary Yup'ik culture.

Spirituality is an important theme that runs through the tale of Attu. He is given a vision of himself aging to an old man but always functioning as a great hunter. This vision gives him strength and confidence to become what he desires. He also receives good signs from the spirits such as the elves dancing. Presently, as in many cultures of the world, young Yup'ik children tell stories of the "little people" who live in their villages.

Examples from these two tales show us what can be learned from the stories of other cultures. According to Brown (1986), importance must be placed on rediscovering and reaffirming the cultures of those who are being pressured to leave their traditions. He continues that it is also a grave error to omit from school curriculums content that can affirm cultural heritage. Because the rich diverse culture of the Yup'iks and other indigenous groups are in danger of rapid assimilation into Western culture, it is important to preserve and share those cultures. One important way is through folklore. As suggested by Brown, another important avenue to share the culture is through the young child's classroom curriculum.

Children's Literature

More common in contemporary society is the use of picture books in place of traditional folklore. A well-known book dealing with Eskimo culture is Mama do you love me? by Barbara Lavallee. In this story, a mother of a young child assures her daughter that she is loved and will be loved forever. Although this is not a traditional story, it has a universal theme and it is the artwork that reveals traditional culture and the artifacts of the culture.

Mama do you love me? portrays another Eskimo culture, the Inuits of the Arctic who live in Alaska, Northern Canada, parts of Russia, and Greenland. Some of the

traditions and cultures are similar to the Yup'ik people. Mama and her "Dear One" are wearing the kuspuk, a traditional dress sewn by Eskimo women. It is hooded and long to prevent contact with insects while berry picking or foraging for greens. In addition, the parka is shown. Parkas were made from animal furs or if waterproof outerwear was needed, they were made from walrus or seal intestines. For women, the parka and the kuspuk had extra material in the back to carry their baby.

Mukluks are mentioned in the appendix of the picture book as boots made with fur. Attu, remember killed his first mukluk (seal) and shared it with the villagers. Mukluk boots are constructed of parts of the seal, including the intestines and the fur.

In this story, another type of transportation pictured is the umiak. This was a large boat (15-20 feet) made from whale bone and covered with walrus or seal skins. The information in Mama do you love me? was researched by the McCord Museum of Candian History in Montreal and was written to share a traditional culture.

Although, it is difficult to know and understand diverse cultures, using folktales and stories can provide information for more than a cursory explanation of differences. Sharing the culture through the knowledge and the wisdom of the elders, appreciating the folklore for the knowledge contained, and being thankful for these "gifts of words" is an important lesson of life for everyone.

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